

REJOICING
December 13, 2009

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Psalm 97
Luke 2:8-11
Philippians 4:4-7

"I am bringing you good news of great joy."
Luke 2:10 (NRSV)

"Rejoice in the Lord always;
again I will say, Rejoice."
Philippians 4:4 (NRSV)

O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by thine advent here:
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

Latin, c. twelfth century

*Dear God, we are so busy with all the demands
Christmas places upon us that it's hard to remember
what it's all about. So in these precious moments of quiet,
open our ears to the singing of angels, open our minds
to the staggering news, open our hearts to joy. Amen.*

"Deck the Halls with boughs of holly. . . . 'Tis the season to be jolly," etc., etc. In addition to the relentless good cheer that is in the air these days, there is what scholars call an "alternate narrative" rumbling along beneath the surface. It is the venerable tradition of Christmas grouchiness. Its most eloquent spokesperson, everyone knows, is Scrooge: Ebenezer Scrooge of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. "Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner. Hard and sharp as flint. The cold within him froze his features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek."

On Christmas Eve, his nephew and employee, Bob Cratchit, says, "A Merry Christmas, Uncle. God save you." And Scrooge's famous response: "Bah!

Humbug! What's Christmastime to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older and not an hour richer? If I could work my will," says Scrooge indignantly, "every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be boiled in his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!" That's grouchy.

"Joy and Rejoicing" is the theme for this third Sunday of Advent, the joy of Christmas, the joy that is at the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ. Gaudete Sunday it is called in the liturgical church, the Latin word for "joy." And an interesting part of this old tradition is that on this Sunday, there is a rose or pink candle in the Advent wreath. The other candles are purple, the color of penitence. But today— Joy Sunday—we light a pink candle. (It's not pink because Mary really wanted a baby girl, as some have suggested.)

Christmas Joy Sunday. But there is this literary tradition of Christmas grouchiness. Scrooge is its first spokesperson. A little closer at hand is Dr. Seuss's unforgettable character, the Grinch. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* has been "must" reading in my home for years:

The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season!
Now please don't ask why. No one knows quite the reason.
It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.
But I think that the most likely reason of all
May have been that his heart was two sizes too small. . . .
"They're hanging their stockings," he snarled with a sneer.
"Tomorrow is Christmas; it's practically here!"
Then he growled, with his Grinch fingers nervously drumming,
"I *must* find some way to stop Christmas from coming."

So the Grinch steals Christmas on Christmas Eve, all of it—stockings and gifts, trees and wreaths, the roast in the icebox, even the log in the fireplace—and spirits it away to throw it all over a cliff.

Garrison Keillor wrote a column on the topic last week: the joy of Christmas when it confronts the legendary grouchiness of New Yorkers. "Christmas is a joyful time," Keillor wrote, "but one gets tired of enforced joyfulness, especially when it's Walmart and Amazon doing the prompting, and you sort of enjoy a little anger to season the season." Keillor told about stepping from the curb in Manhattan and walking in front of a big SUV and the driver went to the trouble of rolling down the window and shouting a profanity. When Keillor pointed out that the traffic was so snarled that the driver couldn't turn onto the street he wanted to, he became even more abusive and profane. "I just said, 'Merry Christmas,'" Keillor wrote. "This irked him. He told me to go molest myself."

Tribune columnist John Kass weighed in with an editorial last Thursday: “Lottery Commercial Redefines Joy in the Chicago Way.” I complained a little last Sunday that the Illinois Lottery was using Christmas to promote the lottery and had stolen our best Christmas carol, “Joy to the World,” and turned it into a jingle to sell more lottery tickets. The voiceover sets a new standard of tackiness with “Joy someone with holiday scratch-offs from the Illinois Lottery. Who knows? They might joy you back.” That made John Kass grouchy—and it does me, too.

Knowing that I’m a little grouchy about this, the church staff, at the annual Christmas party Friday night, gave me my very own Lottery ticket, with the infamous inscription “Joy someone.” I didn’t win, either.

You can make a good case that the Christian faith and the Jewish and Christian Bible are basically about joy.

“The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice,” the psalmist exhorts (Psalm 97:1).

“O come let us sing to the Lord. Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.” (Psalm 95:1)

The prophet Isaiah: “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. . . . Shout aloud and sing for joy.” (Isaiah 12:3, 6)

One of the most fascinating examples is in the Old Testament book of the prophet Zephaniah, and the reason is that Zephaniah is really unpleasant, the gloomiest, most unrelentingly dismal and depressing book in the Bible. Things are so terrible, people are so awful, there is simply nothing good to say. The only thing is for God to destroy everything and start all over again. And then, after several chapters of this, near the end, without warning:

“Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart.”

Apparently there’s something going on here that is more important than all the evil and injustice and despair in the world; something more profound, more real, than all the dismal gloom the prophet sees in the world; apparently there is a light shining in the darkness.

Speaking of darkness and despair, St. Paul was in jail, in a dark, dank cell somewhere in the Roman Empire, we’re not sure where exactly, but we know he was on his way to Rome for his trial and probably execution. And what does he say to his friends in the little church in Philippi, who themselves were facing persecution, torture, and possible death?

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

This is no superficial, Pollyannaish, phony cheerfulness. This is something that wells up out of the depths of a person’s soul, something grounded in a reality more real, more powerful, than any jail cell, any physical torture; more real than death itself. “Rejoice—always; again I say, Rejoice.”

Ironically, Christianity and the Christian church are not, in the public imagination, very joyful or even very happy. Duke Professor Philip Caldwell tells about his grandmother changing churches late in her life. When he asked her why, she responded that in her new church she felt, for the first time in her life, God’s loving presence. “God wants me to be happy,” she said. “I never knew that before. I thought church was about keeping me from doing what I was not supposed to do. And I never felt like I was good enough” (*Feasting on the Word*).

In his autobiography, *God Was in the Laughter*, the late David H.C. Read remembers the Presbyterianism of his upbringing in Scotland: morning and evening prayers, endless church services, a stern piety. Not a particularly pleasant experience, he said.

Indeed “Presbyterian” is used by some writers as a synonym for grim, moralistic, tight-lipped piety. We Presbyterians kid ourselves by describing our church as “God’s Frozen People.”

There’s a new book out, *The Story of Joy*, by Adam Potkay, that argues that joy is not only a human capacity but integral, central to our humanity. Medical science knows about it: happy, joyful people are inclined to be healthy. In a now famous self-designed experiment, the late Norman Cousins, editor of the old *Saturday Review*, suffering from an acute and painful blood disease, treated himself with laughter: watched funny movies all day long and began to feel better and be better. Researchers discovered that laughter, joy, actually stimulates the brain to produce endorphins, which help us cope with pain. But, Adam Potkay thinks, most people are not joyful; most people live joyless lives. Yet joy is integral to our humanness. We are missing something important if we are living joyless lives. And, Potkay notes, joy must be shared to be fully experienced. We know about that, I think. Joy simply cannot be contained, confined; it has to come out, be spoken, shared, shouted, or sung. You simply have to phone someone and say, “Guess what?” Joy must be told. To recover joy, so integral to our humanity, Potkay says, is worth arguing for (*Context*, October 2009).

It’s an uphill battle. There is a lot about life that is not particularly conducive to joy and rejoicing. The cover of the December 7 issue of *Time* magazine showed a crying baby sitting in the middle of the shattered remains of a New Year’s Eve party. The headline read “The Decade from

Hell.” The article suggests that the decade that began with the Y2K scare and 9/11 terrorist attacks, included long, costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hurricane Katrina—the worst natural disaster in our history—and ended with a massive financial wipeout “will likely go down as the most dispiriting and disillusioning decade Americans have lived through since World War II.”

“Rejoice always; do not worry about anything,” St. Paul admonished. That’s easier said than done. We do worry. We have bills to pay, children to raise; we have mortgages and home improvement loans; we have less money than we had a few years ago; and everybody wants it in this season. We worry about our cholesterol, our weight, and the state of the nation. And Christmas, for some of us, is a particularly stressful time. There is so much to get ready and do and we want everything to be perfect, and sometimes it is, frankly, too much. So for some, stress levels soar and depression deepens at Christmas. For some, the relentless cheerfulness on television accentuates our grief over the loss of a loved one, our fears for our own lives, our prospects, our health.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice,” a man wrote to his friends from a jail cell, on his way to death. And the one he followed, Jesus, on the last evening of *his* life, knowing that he was just hours away from his crucifixion, sitting at table with his friends, eating their last meal together, must have startled them:

“I have said these things to you so that my *joy* may be in you and that your *joy* may be complete.”

There is something going on here, something at the heart of the biblical witness, that is so profoundly good that the only appropriate response is joy—not penitence, guilt, remorse, not even reverence, but joy. There is something going on so profoundly good that nothing in our circumstances can overcome it, a light so steady and resilient that no darkness, no matter how dark, can extinguish it.

Frederick Buechner was watching the show at Sea World, of all places, watching in astonishment as those magnificent, huge whales hurled themselves into the bright sky, and the astonishing beauty of it brought tears to his eyes. “Joy,” he said, “rises up every once in a while, out of simply being alive, part of the fathomless richness of the world God has made” (“The Great Dance,” *Secrets in the Dark*, p. 240).

When, on a dark night long ago, shepherds were startled by a sky full of light and singing, they heard an angel, a messenger from God: “Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”

A little later, wise men from the East came to Bethlehem, and when they saw the star in the sky, Matthew says, “they were overwhelmed with joy.”

From his birth to his death thirty-three years later and his resurrection three days after that, the story of Jesus Christ is the story of joy.

Frederick Buechner reflects, “Joy is home. God created us in joy and created us for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us from that joy” (*Secrets in the Dark*, p. 240).

One of my favorite duties is to write a little greeting to each of our members, ninety and older, on their birthdays. Patty Jenkins, Director of our Center for Life and Learning, gives me the names every month with a little information about each. Last month the list included a name of a ninety-three-year-old who, the note said, suffers from advanced Alzheimer’s and is not at all communicative. I’m a little ashamed to admit it, but for a moment I thought, Why don’t I not write this one, save a stamp? After all, she can’t read it, won’t understand if someone reads it to her. Why bother? But because I was thinking about the promise that there is light shining in every darkness and thinking about old Paul, sitting in his dark jail cell and writing “Rejoice,” I wrote it:

Dear Elizabeth,

Congratulations on the wonderful occasion of your ninety-fourth birthday.

I’m grateful to God for your life.

God bless you in the days ahead.

Happy birthday.

and signed it because . . .

. . . there is light that shines in every darkness.

Because of the birth of a child in Bethlehem, there is good news of great joy to all the people, wherever they are, whoever they are, whatever is happening to them.

Because of the man the child became, the love and compassion he embodied.

Because his followers have found in him courage and hope in times of suffering and tragedy; there is good news of great joy.

And because today, in whatever circumstance you find yourself, God comes to you, to love and save and give you life in all its promise and fullness. There is reason for great rejoicing.

Even Scrooge and the Grinch found it irresistible.

So in the noise and accelerating busyness of the days ahead, listen for a quiet voice, the voice of an angel, a messenger from God:

“Behold! Good news of a great joy for all the people.”

Amen.